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A GERMAN PRINTER'S CRITICISM OF MODERN ART
BY J. M. BOWLES



IN the course of the two years' since "Modern Art" adopted its present form there have been some adverse criticisms against the typographical policy and appearance of the magazine as well as many favorable comments upon it. The fact that the latter have always outnumbered the former means a good deal, but not all that the greatly unequal proportions would indicate, for it is often easier to pay a hurried compliment than to reason out a thoughtful criticism. Not that I do not appreciate the many sincere, earnest words of commendation that have been written; I only mean that much reviewing of magazines and books is necessarily superficial. The following extract from a letter to Mr. Louis Prang is an excellent example of the adverse criticism which "Modern Art" occasionally receives. It is excellent because it sets forth in condensed form the main points made against the kind of printing I like, and it is worthy of selection because it comes from an authority on printing in Germany, that is one school of printing, Mr. Theodore Goebel, of Stuttgart. He says spicily:

You want to hear what I think about "Modern Art," of which you were kind enough to send me a number. I would like to refer you to my publication, "The Graphic Arts of Our Time," and to the way in which it is made up. From this you will infer that "Modern Art" does not please me. The type, considered by itself, is no doubt better than many of our modern, rather too delicate types, as far as facility in reading is concerned; but whatever advantage it has in this respect it loses by the lines being set too close together, making it thereby confusing to the eye. Such heavy types require decidedly a good deal of light if they are to be read easily, otherwise

they cause a sort of glimmering before the eye.

And now for the headings of the articles. To set these without any spacing between them and the text, I find positively ugly and preposterous. The title "Modern Art" seems to me on this account a contradiction, because there is really nothing more modern in it except the attempt to make something old appear as new. It is also ugly and against all rules to put the text so close to the decorations. In short, I am no friend of such warmed-up old art. "To keep to the old with diligence and faith, and therefrom to form with art the new," that is my motto.

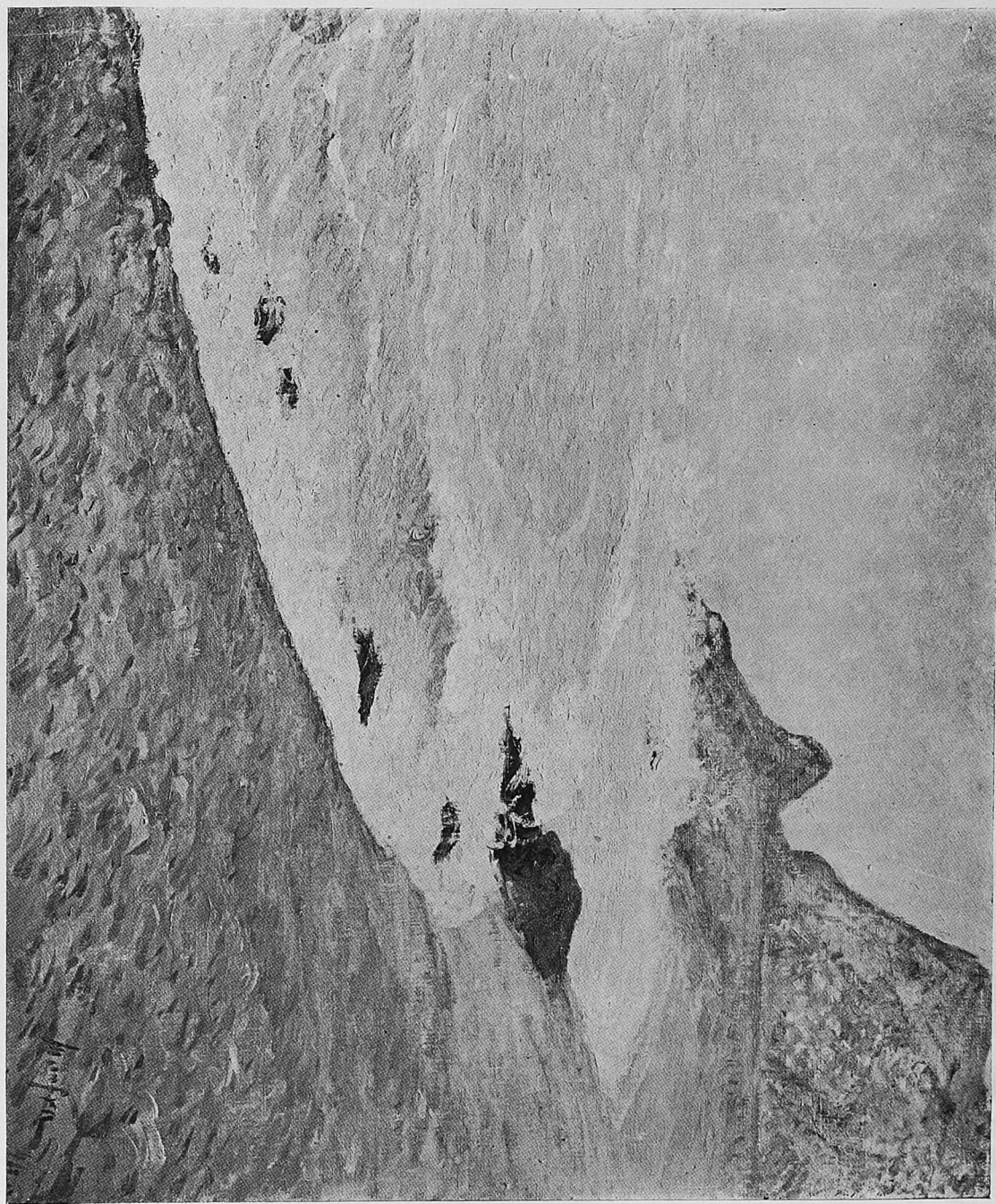
Well, Mr. Goebel's book arrived one day, a forty-pounder, with a large metal medallion imbedded in the thickest part of its heavy red and gold sides. I looked at it, when Mr. Prang asked me told him what I thought of it, and it was laid aside. Suddenly one day it was ordered sent, regardless of expense, to Philadelphia, addressed "Mr. Harold M. Duncan, Editor of 'Paper and Press,'" and shortly after came back accompanied by the following letter, which so well states the other side of the case that I am going to quote it in my defense.

My dear Mr. Prang:

I received the copy of "Die Graphischen Künste der Gegenwart" safely, and have gone through its pages and splendid examples of work by various processes with some pleasure, and a

great deal of appreciation for your exceeding kindness.

Our conversation, when you were last in the office, having taken the direction of Mr. Goebel's book, from a typographic standpoint, as also his



strictures upon the letterpress pages of your very artistic "Modern Art," I am constrained to write you frankly what I think about "Die Graphischen Künste der Gegenwart."

First, Mr. Goebel alludes to the type pages of his book as showing you what he considers the standards of artistic typography, in this respect. They thus stand as the epitome of his own canons. I can see neither beauty nor definite justification in anything else than his margins, which are not bad, but optically adapted to pleasing effect. His letter, itself, is a symmetrical one, as to form, but is so utterly colorless, so lacking in virility, so dim in its impression, that I was much disappointed when I first looked at it. It is but an emphasized expression of that effeminacy which began with the Bodoni letter, was perpetuated in the various "rhetorical" romans, and still clings, vampire-like, to the organism of the modern book-letter.

With respect to Mr. Goebel's page, the same fault which inheres with his letter is emphasized, and magnified, withal; for it is hopeless to expect that one can begin wrong and not end so. His page is too open, and by double leading the

lines of letter he gets grayness of impression. So far as printing is concerned, this, to my mind, is a cardinal defect. It sacrifices the first requirement of typography, viz., legibility, in the endeavor to conserve what is, singularly enough, termed "elegance."

No, no, my dear Mr. Prang, your "Modern Art" is superlatively beyond Mr. Goebel's typographic standards, as to letter and page make-up. As to details, of course, such as the use of shoulder and side sub-titles, etc., I confess that I differ with Mr. Bowles. It is my idea that the use of such things is "a reversion of type," and what we ought to do in such cases as involve a renaissance is rather to originally adapt than to imitate. However, I confess to an admiration for Mr. Bowles' canons with respect to bookmaking, as far as "Modern Art" is concerned, and likewise confess to a disgust for the style of typography of which Mr. Goebel is but one of many exponents.

Believe me, always,

Very faithfully yours,

HAROLD M. DUNCAN.

A GERMAN PRINTER'S CRITICISM

Observe the tit-for-tat. Mr. Goebel finds my type "glimmering." Mr. Duncan finds his illegible. When doctors disagree—!

Now this is a question which will never be settled; it is a part of the war of schools. Mr. Goebel's page was a disappointment because it expressed an ideal which is perfectly commonplace, and if Mr. Goebel dislikes the "blacker" page such as was used in the great days of printing, nothing I can say can make him change his mind. However, I must meet his charges, and also make a statement of the limitations under which we must work. This type is not ideal nor what I would wish it to be; it is only the best that could be found, after much research in the type market. It is a trifle ungraceful in drawing, but it is masculine and makes a strong page. The headings are set as they are in order to preserve the unity of page. The idea is that the two open pages of white paper are the background. The two pages of type in black or red, properly placed on the paper, form the important fundamental mass of the design, and the initial, border, and other decorations are the flowers which spring from this growth and which must be supported by it. I claim that the light, hair-line types utterly fail to do this, and are weak, insipid, and characterless both by themselves and in the mass. In nearly every modern book one opens the decorations fairly jump at you, the pages of type are so gray, so delicate that they are powerless to hold them down and back in their proper place; a page and its ornament should be firmly welded together, or better still should appear to be one organic whole. No virile designer can be asked to draw down to the half-dead and microscopic insignificance of line used in ordinary type; in order to keep the two together the type-designer must make the forward step and learn to draw his letters once more with the natural human weight and width of line that the artist employs when he designs a decoration.